
Collaborative Coaching and Networking for Online Instructors

Jason D. Baker, Ph.D.
Regent University
1000 Regent University Drive
Virginia Beach , VA 23464
Phone: (757) 226-4447, Fax: (757) 226-4857
E-mail: jasobak@regent.edu

Kristin L. Redfield, Ed.D.
Forsyth Technical Community College
2100 Silas Creek Parkway
Winston-Salem , NC 27103

Shauna Tonkin, Ph.D.
Regent University
1000 Regent University Drive
Virginia Beach , VA 23464

Abstract

This paper presents a model of professional development using collaborative coaching and networking which has been used to improve online instructor effectiveness. Components of the model are presented in the context of a ten-year-old faculty development program at a private university in the Southeast. A collaborative coaching checklist is also provided.

Introduction

Online learning programs are growing at a faster rate than their face-to-face counterparts. According to the Sloan Consortium's (2005) most recent study, the overall online enrollment increased over 18% in the previous year, from 1.98 million in online learners 2003 to 2.35 million in 2004. Furthermore, they found that 65% of higher education institutions were using core faculty rather than adjuncts to teach their online courses. Responding to such rapid enrollment growth has led some institutions to place their instructors in the online environment with minimal training, which portends problems for both faculty and student retention. Carr (2000) posits that student retention and faculty experience may be related. She notes that average dropout rate figures for online courses range from 20% to nearly 60%, and often show a discrepancy of 10 to 20 percentage points lower in distance education courses. "Whether the students who leave distance education do so because of busy schedules or because their teachers are inexperienced in online teaching is becoming a critical question in higher education" (para. 5).

As critical participants in online education, novice and experienced faculty alike require training and support to become skilled online instructors. McKinzie and McCallie (1999) note that "many times, teaching faculty members how to 'teach online' requires that they be 'reacquainted' with best practices in the traditional, face-to-face setting" (p. 2). In traditional higher education classrooms, instructors teach using a craft model where they bear full responsibility for the

course content, design, and delivery. Since faculty are the content experts, and the university provides an infrastructure (i.e., classrooms, lights, desks, etc.) in which the faculty can gather with the students, the details of how to best manage these meetings are left to the instructors. However, in the online environment the instructor-learner interaction is mediated through online communication, so one's fluency and usage of the medium itself affects the learning experience in a way substantially different from face-to-face teaching.

The consensus in the literature is that training prior to teaching online is no longer optional, but instead teacher readiness and preparation is imperative to positive distance learning student experiences (e.g., Barker, 2002; Salmon, 2000; Webb et al., 2004). In their 2000 report *Quality on the Line: Benchmarks for Success in Internet-Based Distance Education*, the researchers at The Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP) identified twenty four benchmarks for ensuring effective online education. Among the faculty support benchmarks were the following:

- “Faculty members are assisted in the transition from classroom teaching to online instruction and are assessed during the process” (p. 37).
- “Instructor training and assistance, including peer mentoring, continues through the progression of the online course.” (p. 3).

At one Southeastern private university, this call for training and assistance for online instructors was addressed through a model of collaborative coaching and networking. The use of such collaborative coaching and networking into the instructors' training and support plan serves as an impetus not only for initial training but also for continual improvement of their online pedagogical strategies in light of increasing student and technological sophistication. This paper will highlight this university's approach to collaborative coaching and networking as a solution to the challenge of online faculty development and present a sample model which can be used for such coaching.

Faculty Training Needs

Abrahamson (1998) notes that the uncomfortable or overwhelming feeling that instructors face when initially teaching online stems from the lack of training and perceived lack of direct contact with the student. Anderson et al. (2001) clearly state that while “the teacher is an active member of the [online] community,” he or she also plays another, more important role: “the teacher's task is to create a narrative path through the mediated instruction and activity set such that students are aware of the explicit and implicit learning goals and activities in which they participate” (p. 7). If the instructor projects these goals and activities well, the students can have full awareness of them and can create a stronger, more open, potentially friendlier classroom that displays and validates shared interactions.

McKenzie and McCallie (1999) identify seven critical elements that should be addressed in the critical technology training: voluntary participation, need-based training, sufficient time to learn, access to appropriate technology, external support, on-site support, interaction among peers, and “the incorporation of adult learning principles” (p. 4). In addition to being trained in the use of technology, faculty must have the resources they need to continue teaching in that manner, as noted by McKenzie and McCallie (1999): “the development and/or conversion of courses to be taught in a web-based environment requires significant support for faculty involved in that process” (p.2). It is not enough take the instructors through the steps of simple coursework

implementation and execution, such as posting assignments and discussion board prompts, yet fail to look at the actual wording and underscored construction of those prompts and course products and systems (Simpson & Head, 2000).

In many college and university environments, numerous instructors have been placed in countless classrooms and are forced to struggle their own way through discovering how to teach. The learning curve to determine effective practices, goals, and objectives can be steep, and many instructors return to memories of the college classes that they sat through, trying to glean what they can from prior situations they recall occurring, outdated syllabi that they have squirreled away in boxes, and older teaching methods that they experienced themselves while in school. While this may aid them in getting by in the traditional classroom, it is insufficient for the online classroom, and may be, in fact, detrimental to the student who is struggling in an already decidedly difficult environment.

Initial and continued professional development and training in online education is a concern for faculty:

It is assumed by academic institutions that if online courses and programs are offered, teachers will know how to teach in that environment ... Our experience both in teaching online courses and in consulting with the faculty, faculty developers, and administrators across the United States is that the opposite is true. Faculty need training and assistance in making the transition to the online environment. (Palloff and Pratt, 2001, p. xv)

Palloff and Pratt (2001) propose in their suggestions for creating successful courses and programs that administration “provide training for both faculty and students in the new roles required to create online learning communities and complete courses successfully” (p. 163).

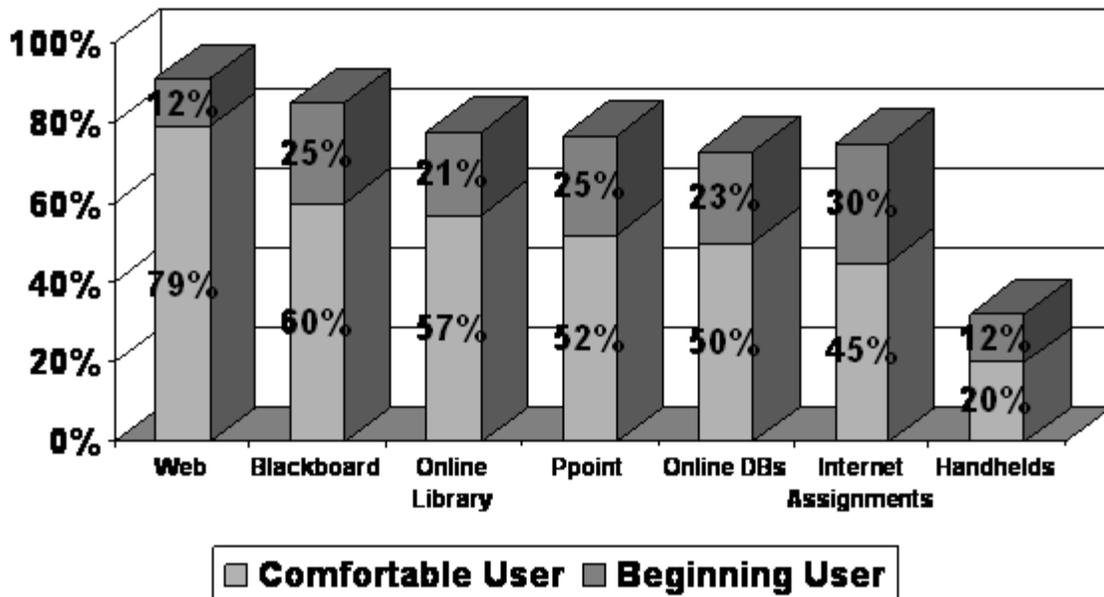
Faculty Training Gaps

Since a large majority of faculty at this Southwest university already teach both face-to-face and online, it became important to determine their level of technological sophistication and online pedagogical strategies, as a way of improving the faculty development offerings. Accordingly, the university conducted a series of surveys measuring technological proficiency and online pedagogy of full-time faculty. Over 90% of the full-time faculty responded to the surveys.

Of those faculty that taught online, regardless of load percentage, the plurality of faculty (36%) had been teaching online courses for three or four years. Twenty four percent of faculty teaching online courses stated that they logged into their courses daily with another 38% logging in four to six times per week. Sixty five percent agreed or strongly agreed that they were effective online teachers, although 52% indicated that they still were more effective teaching campus-based courses.

There were three technologies which the majority of faculty respondents indicated that they were comfortable users: finding information on the World Wide Web, using Blackboard, and creating and using PowerPoint presentations with other proficiencies following in decreasing frequency (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Faculty proficiency with various computer technologies.



Faculty identified a number of technologies which they indicated that they would like to use in their online and on-campus courses if they could learn how. In ranked order, these included multimedia, streaming media, videoconferencing, Acrobat/PDF files, Web page creation, and digital photography. When asked what resources or services that faculty would like to have in order to more effectively use technology in their teaching, the responses were mixed. Almost half of the responses revolved around a request for more or better equipment, a quarter expressed a desire for more training, and a handful identified more or better trained support personnel. When asked additional questions about technical training, the most common requests were for additional technology training opportunities for faculty, creating online versions for asynchronous, self-paced training, and an increase in technical support staff.

In general, faculty indicated that various technologies either added to or significantly added to teaching effectiveness, but the majority of faculty indicated that the content of their online and offline courses was basically the same (57%) as were the assessment tasks (53%), but 66% stated that their teaching techniques differed between online and offline courses. Sixty six percent indicated that their online students were either as active or more active in class discussion than their on-campus students. Faculty indicated that they were able to develop collegial relationships with online students, with 32% indicating the same level as with on-campus students and 24% indicating that they were stronger relationships than with on-campus students. Despite these seemingly positive factors, forty one percent of faculty teaching online courses stated that their campus students learn more than their online students.

In the open-ended questions, a number of faculty teaching online indicated that they were anxious for a more media-rich learning experience. The current mode of online learning, which is largely text-based, was often criticized for taking too much time and hindering the relational connection between teacher and student. The desire to see more audio and video conferencing in online courses was the single most commonly-cited feature when asked in an open-ended question how they imagined their courses looking in five years. Clearly there is a desire among existing online faculty to make the online learning experience richer and more personal and the authors believe that collaborative coaching and networking can provide a valuable non-threatening means of improving online instruction.

Faculty Training and Networking

While the university offers numerous face-to-face and online learning opportunities for faculty, often relating to particular technologies or software applications, an interlocking model of faculty training was also developed. This model consists of a year-long faculty development seminar known as the Master Instructor Program and a one-on-one outgrowth of that program of collaborative coaching. This model has provided numerous opportunities for faculty to encourage one another in developing quality instruction without feeling that they're being forced into one style or model which is being dictated by the administrators or technologies. The authors have observed this in multiple university settings where skeptical professors were much more likely to respond to an enthusiastic colleague than someone from outside the faculty, particularly if the outsider is an administrator or techie. Furthermore, this framework has provided faculty with an increased exposure to the online education environment, enabling them to view others' online courses rather than only ever seeing their own. Such exposure has been particularly effective for new online instructors.

The Master Instructor Program (MIP) is a year-long (two-semester) commitment that currently involves a dozen faculty members per year. Faculty who have demonstrated effectiveness as an instructor and had at least two years of full-time experience in teaching at the university level are encouraged to apply to the program every spring. From these applications, twelve instructors are selected from across the different schools within the university to participate. Selected faculty make a commitment to the program and receive a stipend and university recognition as a result.

Participants meet over lunch bi-weekly to present their ideas and stimulate discussion about teaching and learning. These meetings are guided by experienced instructors and feature interdisciplinary topics, formal and informal training seminars, shared best practices, and most importantly structured and informal dialogue and networking among the faculty. The collaborative coaching model is also introduced and practiced during the second semester,

The MIP program is kept small to ensure that participants develop meaningful professional relationships and receive personal attention related to their instructional needs. Throughout the ten-years of the MIP program, participants have reported not only improvements in their own instructional practices but new bonds of collegiality and friendship with other faculty across disciplines. At the conclusion of the program, faculty are certified as Master Instructors.

A consequence of the focused size of the MIP program is the increased need to extend in-depth training to other faculty around campus. Accordingly, MIP graduates are encouraged to engage others around campus to help improve the educational effectiveness of the institution. Each year, Master Instructors must recertify by presenting a paper related to instruction at an academic conference, publishing an article or book related to instruction, engaging in a cycle of collaborative coaching with a peer, mentoring a new faculty member for a semester, consulting on curriculum design, or other similar activities. This ensures not only ongoing professional development for MIP graduates but also encourages that Master Instructors will share their experiences with others. The collaborative coaching process which is introduced during the MIP program is one way in which participating faculty improve their online instruction but the impact is multiplied throughout the university.

Collaborative Coaching

Peer observation and coaching activities are an accepted means of generating data for assessing teaching effectiveness and adopting this practice reinforces the concept that faculty are the best judges of institutional quality (DeZure, 1999). However, in the absence of established procedures and adequate training, peer coaching is benign at best and in many cases wastes valuable faculty resources. The university employed a method of collaborative coaching for face-to-face courses as part of the first six years of the Master Instructor Program and in the past four years has adapted this model for the online instructor. During the MIP, participants engage in a collaborative coaching cycle with another colleague, and share their findings with the larger group when the process has been completed. The collaborative coaching cycle consists of three stages: a planning conference, the actual instructional observation, and a reflecting conference.

Planning Conference

The planning conference is a structured meeting in which the instructor and the collaborative coach discuss their collaborative effort with a particular focus on the goals of the instructor. Unlike other observation and feedback models, this collaborative coaching model does not promote open-ended feedback. Rather, during the planning conference the instructor briefs the collaborative coach on the specifics of the upcoming class session including such factors as the topic under consideration, the objectives for the session, the planned teaching and learning activities, the sequence and pacing of the session, and formal or informal assessments included in the session. It's critical that there be a clear purpose for engaging in collaborative coaching and that this is communicated to the coach during the planning conference since feedback on issues other than these pre-arranged ones is off-limits.

Once the basic educational environment is selected, the instructor requests specific aspects that he or she would like the collaborative coach to observe. The instructor may have difficulty getting a quality online discussion going among students and would like the collaborative coach to observe the discussion board for a week (as well as perhaps the archive of previous weeks) and offer recommendations for improvement. Maybe the instructor teaches the entire course using Word and PowerPoint documents and would like recommendations for how to include tools such as podcasting, streaming video, or other multimedia to enhance the online course. Such focused requests help to build trust between the instructor and coach, ensure that the observation and feedback will support the instructor's goals, and promotes genuineness and vulnerability (rather than an instructional "performance") during the lesson.

For online courses, the collaborative coach should commit to at least one week of observation, logging into the course site multiple times throughout the week as well as examining the prior weeks' efforts (with the instructor's permission). Since the dominant model of online education in higher education uses the Asynchronous Learning Networks approach, most courses have some type of weekly structure. At this university, online classes follow a traditional semester schedule but break the lessons into week-long intervals (highlighted by threaded discussions), one week in Blackboard is equivalent to a week's worth of face-to-face class time. Typical questions to consider during the planning conference include: What is the week going to be about? What are the objectives for the week? What will the learners be doing? What will the instructor be doing? How will the instructor know if an activity is successful? How will the instructor know if the educational objectives were achieved? What will the instructor want feedback on?

In summary, the following tasks should be accomplished in the planning conference:

1. Identify the instructor's concern about instruction
2. Translate the concerns into observable behavior
3. Identify procedures for improving the instructor's teaching and students' learning
4. Set goals and content, arrange time for observation, and choose appropriate instruments

Instructional Observation

The second phase in the collaborative coaching cycle is the actual instructional observation. The collaborative coach takes notes based on the observations of the class, using the planning conference requests as a framework. In addition, there are many observations which the collaborative coach is encouraged to make, even if he or she doesn't directly communicate the findings to the instructor, since it provides both a context for the online learning experience and can serve as an exemplar (or not) for the coach.

The online collaborative coach should take particular notice of the virtual classroom environment and interpersonal communication dynamics. Such facets include the design and layout of the Blackboard Web pages, the tone of the announcements and course materials, the level of learner-instructor and learner-learner engagement in class discussions, the types of media used for presenting materials, the ease of navigation, the clarity of course instructions, and the instructor's mastery of the course content and effectiveness at presenting it to the class. In addition, the level of instructor participation, student reactions, questions posed to the class (e.g., type, frequency counts, and even time between question and answer), communication style, content knowledge, use of rich media, and balance between online and offline assignments are all facets which the collaborative coach could use to assist in the evaluation of the instructor's requests. Following the observation exercise, the collaborative coach is encouraged to review and organize his or her notes in preparation for the follow-up conference.

In summary, the coach should take note of the following during the online instructional observation:

1. Class online atmosphere
2. Learner-instructor interaction
3. Learner-learner interaction
4. Mastery of content
5. Manner of presentation
6. Media selection and usage
7. Use of Blackboard and the Internet
 - Organization

- Clarity of Instructions

8. Discussion Board Implementation

- Equitable Distribution of Comments
- Number of Students Actively Engaged
- Depth of Content Discussion
- Depth of Dialogue (v. Standalone Posts)
- Respect Demonstrated by Students

9. Design Usability

10. Assessment Techniques

11. Link to Course Objectives

Reflecting Conference

The final phase is the reflecting or post-observation conference in which the instructor and collaborative coach meet to debrief the observed class session. During this meeting, the collaborative coach begins by providing the instructor with feedback based on his or her observations of the class. The feedback presentation typically includes describing the relevant observations, analyzing and interpreting the observations in light of the questions posed during the pre-observation meeting, and offering additional data which support the focus questions.

After presenting such feedback to the instructor in an informational rather than judgmental manner, the collaborative coach elicits the instructor's inferences, opinions, and feelings. This provides an opportunity for the pair to dialogue about the observations and their consequences rather than having the collaborative coach simply debrief the instructor. The collaborative coach is discouraged from giving direct advice but instead to listen intently, ask clarifying questions, focus on the specific observations rather than offer personal commentary, and seek to agree together as to the meaning of the observations. The collaborative coach then closes the conference on a positive and productive note by helping the instructor develop an action plan to improve in the focus areas.

As a postscript to the collaborative coaching process, collaborative coaches should document their relevant observations in an essay or letter to the instructor as a means of helping the instructor use the experience for significant professional development. Furthermore, subsequent to the reflecting conference, the instructor is asked to comment on the collaborative coaching process (preferably in writing). This provides a final opportunity for reflection by the instructor and also helps to provide feedback which can be used to improve the collaborative coaching process.

In summary, the following tasks should be accomplished in the planning conference:

1. Provide the instructor with feedback
 - Oral and Written if Appropriate
 - Informational not Judgmental
 - Avoid Giving Direct Advice Unless Asked
2. Elicit instructor's inferences, opinions, and feelings
3. Close conference on a positive and productive note
4. Evaluate the process

There are a number of variations on this collaborative coaching model that can be considered, particularly in the online environment. One is to engage in a collaborative coaching cycle of an archived course rather than a live one. Since most online courses are stored in course management systems, therein lies a rich opportunity for faculty to use collaborative coaching on prior courses. Perhaps an instructor would like to compare a course that went very well with a similar one that went poorly. Maybe coaching of historical courses is less threatening to some instructors than inviting a peer into a live course. Regardless, the possibility of reviewing courses from the past offers an invaluable learning experience for online instructors. In addition, collaborative coaching participants may choose to engage in repeated coaching of same course (perhaps after some adjustments are made as a result of the first round) or reciprocal coaching to learn best practices from one-another.

In addition to various coaching models, the educational community would benefit from empirical studies examining such professional development efforts. While case studies such as this posit benefits based on instructor self-reports, do such coaching efforts actually change instructional behavior in the classroom, particularly after the coaching ceases? More importantly, do students learn better from instructors after they've networked with colleagues and received personalized coaching? Experimental, quasi-experimental, and longitudinal studies measuring faculty effectiveness and student learning would make significant additions to the literature and likely impact instructional practice for the better.

Conclusion

Measurements of educational quality are becoming increasingly significant in the current accountability era and, as such, is emerging as a significant issue in online learning. Rovai and Barnum (2003) declare that, "Standards for monitoring, evaluating, and strengthening on-line course design, pedagogy, and technology are needed" (p. 69). These standards cannot be conveyed without proper training of the online instructors. The training and support resources available to online instructors vary greatly from institution to institution, and even within institutions, and yet remains a critical factor in the long-term success of online education. The use of such a model of faculty networking and collaborative coaching has the potential to help not only improve faculty attitudes and experiences with online instruction but also produce higher retention and student satisfaction rates.

Appendix: Collaborative Coaching Checklist

The collaborative coaching model can be presented in a checklist format as follows:

Planning Conference

1. Identify the instructor's concern about instruction
2. Translate the concerns into observable behavior
3. Identify procedures for improving the instructor's teaching and students' learning
4. Set goals and content, arrange time for observation, and choose appropriate instruments

Online Classroom Observation

Take note of the:

1. Class online atmosphere
2. Learner-instructor interaction
3. Learner-learner interaction
4. Mastery of content
5. Manner of presentation
6. Media selection and usage
7. Use of Blackboard and the Internet
 - Organization
 - Clarity of Instructions
8. Discussion Board Implementation
 - Equitable Distribution of Comments
 - Number of Students Actively Engaged
 - Depth of Content Discussion
 - Depth of Dialogue (v. Standalone Posts)
 - Respect Demonstrated by Students
9. Design Usability

10. Assessment Techniques

11. Link to Course Objectives

Reflecting Conference

1. Provide the instructor with feedback
 - Oral and Written if Appropriate
 - Informational not Judgmental
 - Avoid Giving Direct Advice Unless Asked
 2. Elicit instructor's inferences, opinions, and feelings
 3. Close conference on a positive and productive note
 4. Evaluate the process
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